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STUDIES OF IRISH RURAL SETTLEMENT

JAMES H. JOHNSON

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UNTIL recently it was generally thought that isolated farms, dispersed over the cultivated land (Fig. 1), formed a settlement pattern of great antiquity in Ireland. Without investigating the matter deeply, academic geographers explained this pattern in several ways. Some saw it as a product of the pastoral emphasis of Irish agriculture, which necessitated a close relationship between a farmer's residence and his fields.[1] Others, especially Meitzen, regarded the dispersed farms as a direct result of the Celtic heritage of the country.[2] And although professional geographers preferred a cultural explanation, school textbooks tended to seize on an environmental factor, seeing dispersed settlement as a product of the moist Irish climate, which required no concentration on wet-point sites and presumably allowed the cultural factors free play.[3]

Contemporary Studies

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Work by modern geographers on the critical study of Irish rural settlement began in County Donegal. Here E. E. Evans[4] showed that, in parts of the county at least, the single isolated farm is a relatively recent form of settlement, which dates from the nineteenth century rather than survives from any great antiquity. Modern dispersed settlement in Donegal was in fact preceded by "clachans"—clusters of farm dwellings and their associated outbuildings, usually grouped without any formal plan and in the early nineteenth century often consisting of as many as 30–40 houses. Although these clachans normally lacked both inn and church, communal life and the exchange of services were characteristic, and as a rule their inhabitants were related by blood.

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[113] [1] A. Demangeon: La géographie de l'habitat rural (International Geographical Congress, London and Cambridge, 1928: Report of the Commission on Types of Rural Settlement, pp. 41–80), p. 59.

[2] August Meitzen: Siedelung und Agrarwesen der Westgermanen und Ostgermanen, der Kelten, Römer, Finnen und Slawen (3 vols. and atlas, Berlin, 1895), Vol. 1, pp. 174–182.

[312] [3] The advantage of universal water supplies in Ireland is more apparent than real. In parts of County Fermanagh, for example, farmers must carry drinking water hundreds of yards to their dispersed farms (cf. J. M. Mogey: Rural Life in Northern Ireland [Oxford, 1947], pp. 35–36), when nucleation around the most satisfactory supply would seem to be a logical arrangement. Personal observation suggests that this is a not uncommon situation on many Irish farms.

[113] [4] Some Survivals of the Irish Openfield System, *Geography*, Vol. 24, 1939, pp. 24–36; Donegal Survivals, *Antiquity*, Vol. 13, 1939, pp. 207–222.

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FIG. 1—Panoramic view of dispersed farmsteads near Carrinure, County Armagh, looking west along the drumlin belt of north Ireland. (Photograph by J. K. St. Joseph, from Cambridge University Collection. British Crown Copyright reserved.)

361 McCourt[5] has been able to map the distribution of relicts of clachan settlement as they were to be found in the 1830's. He has shown that this was a widespread form of settlement in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century, and that it did not disappear in the remoter parts of the country until late in the nineteenth.[6] Indeed, occasional clachans that are still actively functioning can be found today on the Atlantic seaboard (Figs. 2 and 3[7]).

311 361 Associated with clachan settlement was a form of open-field cultivation, comparable to the Scottish infield-outfield system and generally known in

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[5] D. McCourt: The Rundale System in Ireland: A Study of Its Geographical Distribution and Social Relations (Thesis, Ph.D., Queen's University, Belfast, 1950).

[6] D. McCourt: Traditions of Rundale in and around the Sperrin Mountains, *Ulster Journ. of Archaeol.*, Ser. 3, Vol. 16, 1953, pp. 69–84; *idem*: The Rundale System in Donegal: Its Distribution and Decline, *Journ. County Donegal Hist. Soc.*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1955, pp. 47–60.

[7] The author thanks Captain C. Ó Danachair of the Irish Folklore Commission for drawing his attention to the photograph presented as Figure 3.

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Ireland as "rundale" or "runrig."[8] Under rundale the land surrounding a settlement was worked as a joint farm, with individual plots and strips scattered through the arable land, some on the constantly tilled infield and some on shifting outfield patches reclaimed periodically from the waste.[9] By the early nineteenth century this form of agriculture had become extremely complicated, as a result of the rapidly increasing population and of the Irish practice of subdividing a restricted amount of arable land among all the male heirs of the household. In modern surviving examples the clachan and cultivation in rundale are closely interrelated, and it is generally assumed that they do not function independently. But a complication to this interpretation has emerged in a small area of County Down that has been examined by R. H. Buchanan[10] within the limits set by the available manuscript material. Here a set of estate maps shows clachans apparently developed in association with compact holdings. Although this work, which refers to a small area and uses a narrow range of information, may not weaken the great body of evidence that suggests a direct relationship between rundale agriculture and clachan settlement, at least it indicates that the relationship needs to be carefully appraised in each individual case.

Two Nineteenth-Century Investigators

Although changes in the pattern of Irish rural settlement have only recently been uncovered by research, the periodic reports of the various Royal Commissions concerned with nineteenth-century Ireland make it clear that the inhabitants of the country were not unaware of the changes taking place around them.[11] Hence it is not surprising that at least two nineteenth-century scholars, Frederic Seebohm and August Meitzen, knew of clachan settlement.

Seebohm's attention was focused on the manorial and tribal systems and on the open-field system of cultivation.[12] It was this latter interest in particular

[8] D. McCourt: Infield and Outfield in Ireland, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, Ser. 2, Vol. 7, 1954–1955, pp. 369–376.

[9] Flatrès believes that the outfield was not widely found in Ireland but was a late introduction, brought in the early seventeenth century by Scottish settlers (Pierre Flatrès: Géographie rurale de quatre contrées celtiques—Irlande, Galles, Cornwall & Man [Rennes, 1957]). No attempt has been made here to evaluate Flatrès' ambitious study: of particular interest, however, is his map of the modern field systems of Ireland (Fig. 1). [Reviewed in this number of the *Geographical Review*, p. 599.—Edit. Note.]

[10] The author is grateful to Mr. Buchanan for this information in advance of its publication.

[11] In particular see the evidence presented to the Devon Commission (Report from Her Majesty's Commissioners of Inquiry [Lord Devon, Chairman] into . . . the Occupation of Land in Ireland [6 parts (in 5 vols.), London, 1845; British Parliamentary Papers 1845, XIX–XXIII]).

[12] Frederic Seebohm: The English Village Community, Examined in Its Relations to the Manorial and Tribal Systems and to the Common or Open Field System of Husbandry (2nd edit., London, 1883).

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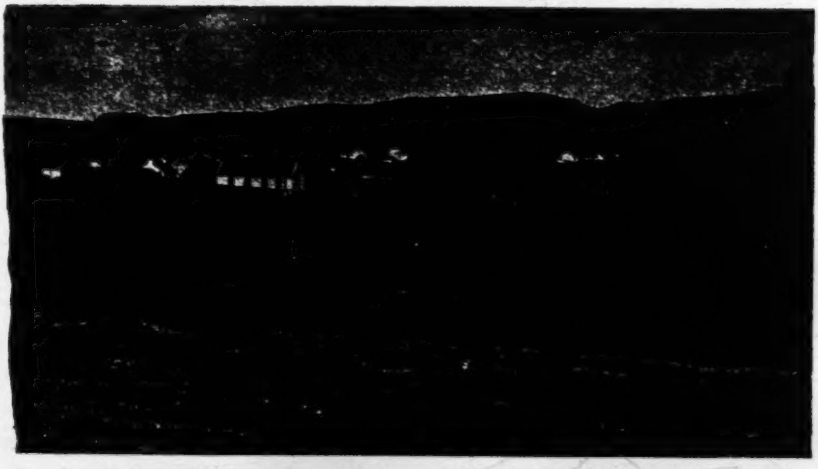

FIG. 2—Ballyhillin, a present-day clachan near Malin Head, County Donegal.

FIG. 3—Kiltullagh, a hamlet of a form common in County Galway. The regularity in the arrangement of the houses is possibly the result of the activity of a former landlord, though it is noticeable that the houses are not perfectly oriented to the road. (Photograph from Irish Press.)

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114 311 361 that led him to pay some attention to the arrangement of settlement on the land. At first sight he does not seem to have been aware of the existence of clachans in Ireland, since he states that under the tribal system homesteads "were scattered over the country and not grouped together in villages and towns," and he seems to suggest that the dispersed settlement of nineteenth-century Ireland was a product of this heritage.[13] But elsewhere in the same work he points out that homesteads were in fact grouped in "arithmetical clusters" which were "the natural method by which the frequent redistributions of the land were made easy; while the runrig form of open-field system was the natural mode of conducting a cooperative and shifting agriculture"[14] —a recognizable description of settlement in clachans. This apparent contradiction must have been produced merely by the lack of a definition of what is meant by the term "village." A clachan was just a group of farm buildings, usually without any other function and without any plan, and hence it would not have appeared "village-like" to an Englishman's eyes, though its total population could have approached that of a village in lowland Britain. Unfortunately, Seebohm's conclusions on Irish settlement cannot be accepted at their face value. Although the form of settlement he describes may have been found in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the period from which he drew his information—it does not follow that these conditions represented the form of settlement associated with the original tribal system, as he suggests. However, at least he was aware that the clachan existed in early-nineteenth-century Ireland.

To geographers Meitzen's work is perhaps better known.[15] His assertion that settlement in isolated farms (*Einzelhöfe*) could be traced back to the mode of a Celtic ethnic group has been criticized on the broad European evidence, but in spite of this he was not unaware of the presence of clachans in Ireland. In the atlas that forms part of his great work (perhaps its most valuable part for modern geographers) several plates derived from nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey maps illustrate clachans and the open fields associated with them.[16] Although he drew much of his information from Seebohm, Meitzen could not accept the theory that clachans originated in Celtic or pre-Celtic time; however, his alternative explanations are unconvincing. It is hard to believe that this settlement form was introduced into Scotland by Scandinavian influence or that in Ireland it was transitional between pastoral

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 223–244.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 230.
[15] Meitzen, *op. cit.* [see footnote 2 above].
[16] *Ibid.*, Atlas to Vol. 3, maps 23 and 25–27.

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and arable use of land.[17] Further, Meitzen does not seem to have been aware of the widespread distribution of the clachan and its associated field system. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that Meitzen was not entirely wrong. Recent work suggests that Celtic freemen in Ireland lived in dispersed farmsteads (known to archeologists as "raths"),[18] though this does not establish that modern dispersed settlement was directly derived from such a heritage, particularly in view of the unsettled history of Ireland during the intervening period.

A Problem in Origins

Moreover, the two forms of settlement—*Einzelhöfe* and clachans—are not necessarily incompatible. Both McCourt and Evans have commented on the way in which clachans wax and wane,[19] largely because of fluctuations in population numbers. Indeed, McCourt cites at least one example from County Antrim in which an individual farm grew into a clachan between 1782 and 1832, and two of the clachans Evans studied in Donegal dissolved into isolated farms sometime between 1834 and 1902.[20]

The problem here seems to be one of origin. Did the clachan bring the infield-outfield system with it, or were the two separate at this earliest stage? If they were separate, it would suggest that their modern survival together on the Atlantic fringe of Ireland may be the result of the independent preservation of ancient practices in a difficult region. For that matter, was the clachan introduced? Examples have already been given of the growth of nucleated settlements from dispersed farmsteads, often in a very short time, and in view of the clachan's lack of plan this manner of origin seems entirely reasonable.

On the other hand, merely to say that the settlement pattern and the field system grew out of the subdivision of a larger enclosed farm is to oversimplify the problem. Meitzen postulated a Celtic people with a tradition of compact farms; but if subdivision took place, surely it would have been a break with that tradition to produce small farms with scattered strips rather

[17] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 207–218.

[18] V. B. Proudfoot: The People of the Forths, *Ulster Folklife*, Vol. 1, 1955, pp. 19–26. See also his "Settlement and Economy in Co. Down from the Late Bronze Age to the Anglo-Norman Invasion" (Thesis, Ph.D., Queen's University, Belfast, 1957).

[19] McCourt, Infield and Outfield in Ireland [see footnote 8 above], p. 376; Evans, Some Survivals of the Irish Openfield System [see footnote 4 above], p. 28.

[20] McCourt, The Rundale System in Ireland [see footnote 5 above], diagram 27; Evans, Some Survivals of the Irish Openfield System [see footnote 4 above], p. 29; E. E. Evans: The Ecology of Peasant Life in Western Europe, *in* Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth, edited by W. L. Thomas, Jr. (Chicago, 1956), pp. 217–230, reference on p. 231.

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than small compact holdings. A further indication that there may have been a fundamental distinction between the systems which is not apparent at first sight lies in the fact that, wherever the historical record goes back continuously into the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, both settlement forms are found to have existed side by side in the same areas and over the whole period.[21] No case is yet known in which an area with nothing but dispersed farms was converted into an area where clachans were completely dominant. Hence, drawing an analogy from Wales, where G. R. J. Jones[22] has carefully examined more plentiful medieval documents than have survived in Ireland, Evans has been led to suggest that the dispersed Iron Age farms (the "raths" referred to above) were the homes of freemen; and bondmen, the descendants of pre-Celtic inhabitants, lived in clachans. Later, in historical time, both groups fell under the control of landlords, but remnants of the former situation survived in the settlement pattern.[23] Some confirmation of this theory has come from Proudfoot's work in County Down, where he has been able to show that raths were not the only form of settlement during the Dark Ages; there were also groups of farms without an enclosing bank, which could be dated to the same period.[24] Such an interpretation regards clachan settlement as being of great antiquity, and indeed it is hard to believe that the cooperative kinship unit (which life in a clachan implies) is other than of considerable age. Further, it suggests that the fundamental antithesis was between systems of landholding, rather than between settlement patterns.

The infield-outfield system also seems to have been an early introduction. It could be suggested, of course, that the system represented an adaptation of the medieval three-field system to the small amount of good arable land available in many parts of Ireland. Medieval agriculture on an English pattern had been introduced into southeastern Ireland by the Normans; and a medieval origin has been suggested for some villages in Wexford, formed of groups of strip farms, which were still functioning in the nineteenth century.[25] But even if this can be firmly established, the Norman influence on agriculture was limited to the southeastern part of the country. In any case, the modern

[21] McCourt, Infield and Outfield in Ireland [see footnote 8 above], p. 376.

[22] G. R. J. Jones: Some Medieval Rural Settlements in North Wales, *Inst. of British Geogrs. Publ. No. 19: Trans. and Papers 1953*, London, 1954, pp. 51–72.

[23] Evans, The Ecology of Peasant Life in Western Europe [see footnote 20 above], p. 231. Earlier, Duignan had tentatively suggested a similar idea but did not relate it to the development of settlement patterns (M. Duignan: Irish Agriculture in Early Historic Times, *Journ. Royal Soc. of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 74, 1944, pp. 124–145; reference on p. 129).

[24] Proudfoot, Settlement and Economy in Co. Down [see footnote 18 above].

[25] J. Otway-Ruthven: The Origin of Anglo-Irish Agriculture in the Middle Ages, *Journ. Royal Soc. of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 81, 1951, pp. 1–13; reference on p. 6.

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survivals of the infield-outfield system in the remoter parts of Ireland would seem to suggest that it dates from a time much earlier than that of the Norman invasion.

Lines of Investigation

These questions and theories widen the field for speculation, but it is difficult to see where to turn for further information, largely because of the meager documentary evidence that survives in Ireland from periods earlier than the eighteenth century. Admittedly, relevant material may be discovered among estate papers, but there are three other lines that might be followed with profit.

One possible approach, field investigation, is illustrated by a project now under way, in which archeological techniques are being used to excavate a clachan in County Down, inhabited until the late nineteenth century. The primary aim is to discover how this particular clachan originated. Did it grow out of a single farm, and, if so, at what date? Two seasons' work has now been completed without conclusive answers to these questions, though some details have been added to the local economic history of County Down.[16] At least it has been shown that a clachan settlement stood on this site about 1780 and that the site had been occupied from sometime near the end of the fifteenth century, if not earlier. Buildings were found underlying the nineteenth-century structures. The fact that some of these remains appear to date from a time before the immigration of Scottish and English settlers into the area in the early seventeenth century should prove important in the study of Irish house types, since the lack of evidence on the development of settlement patterns extends also to the history of individual farm buildings.[17]

Whether this particular excavation will yield further information about

[16] J. H. Johnson, V. B. Proudfoot, and R. H. Buchanan: Excavations at Minerstown, Co. Down: Preliminary Report on Work Completed in 1956, *Ulster Journ. of Archaeol.*, Ser. 3, Vol. 21, 1958. (In press.)

[17] Pioneer work on surviving house types was carried out by A. Campbell (Irish Fields and Houses: A Study of Rural Culture, *Béaloideas*, Vol. 5, 1935, pp. 57–74; Notes on the Irish House, *Folklife*, Vol. 1, 1937, pp. 207–234, and Vol. 2, 1938, pp. 175–196). This has been developed in a series of local studies, so that a comprehensive account of the surviving forms of Irish traditional building is becoming increasingly possible. The best and most recent general account is E. E. Evans' "Irish Folk Ways" (London, 1957; with an extensive bibliography), Chapters 4 and 5. Several important articles on house types and related topics have appeared recently; for example, C. Ó Danachair: Irish Farmyard Types, *Arctica: Studia Ethnographia Upsaliensis No. 11*, 1956, pp. 6–15; A. T. Lucas: Wattle and Straw-Mat Doors in Ireland, *ibid.*, pp. 16–35; C. Ó Danachair: Stand und Aufgaben der Hausforschung in Irland, *Bericht über die Arbeitstagung des Arbeitskreises für Deutsche Hausforschung*, Schleswig, 1955, pp. 29–50; R. H. Buchanan: Thatch and Thatching in North-East Ireland, *Gwerin*, Vol. 1, 1956–1957, pp. 123–142; and C. Ó Danachair: The Bed Out-Shot in Ireland, *Folklife*, Vols. 19–20, 1955–1956, pp. 26–31.

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settlement patterns is somewhat doubtful. There is a reasonable chance of eventual discovery of the origin of settlement on this site, but from the beginning it was realized that only by good fortune would the relation of the clachan to other settlement forms, in particular the Irish raths, be uncovered. However, since relatively little of a substantive nature is known about Irish peasant life until as late as the end of the eighteenth century, any information on the material culture of the inhabitants of this site will be of value. There does not seem to be great hope of uncovering any field systems that may have surrounded the settlement, but similar work elsewhere might be more fortunate.

Place-name evidence provides a second, if somewhat tentative, line of investigation. For instance, J. B. Arthurs has suggested that *baile* (bally), the Gaelic word for home place or townland, may be of pre-Goidelic origin, and that where "ballys" are numerous, indigenous people had been left mainly undisturbed by the Goidelic expansion.[28] If this can be firmly established, it will immediately suggest a parallel with the possible dual system of landholding previously mentioned, particularly since the names of many surviving clachans contain the element "bally." Certainly there is need for further research on this topic.

Aerial photography offers a third line. Irish archeologists have long been aware of its importance[29] and have illustrated excavation reports with photographs taken from the air; but, except locally, this method has not yet been employed systematically in the study of Irish rural settlement. If suitable photographs were available, it is likely that they would illuminate the history of fields and farms in Ireland. At the least a detailed study of the available air photographs would guide further field work on the ground.

Disappearance of the Old System

Such methods of investigation can only hope to produce a few clues in what must be an exercise in detection; and, in a sense, it is some relief to find that the factors involved in the final disappearance of the infield-outfield system and its associated settlement pattern are somewhat clearer than the earlier history of these features. The regional details, however, still remain obscure, since the enclosure of the open fields in Ireland required no parlia-

[28] Quoted in Evans, Irish Folk Ways [see preceding footnote], p. 27.

[29] D. A. Chart: Air-Photography in Northern Ireland, *Antiquity*, Vol. 4, 1930, pp. 453–459; J. Raftery: Air-Photography and Archaeology, *Journ. Royal Soc. of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 74, 1944, pp. 119–123. Proudfoot (Settlement and Economy in Co. Down [see footnote 18 above]) used air photographs in his study of County Down, as did the government-sponsored archeological survey of the same county.

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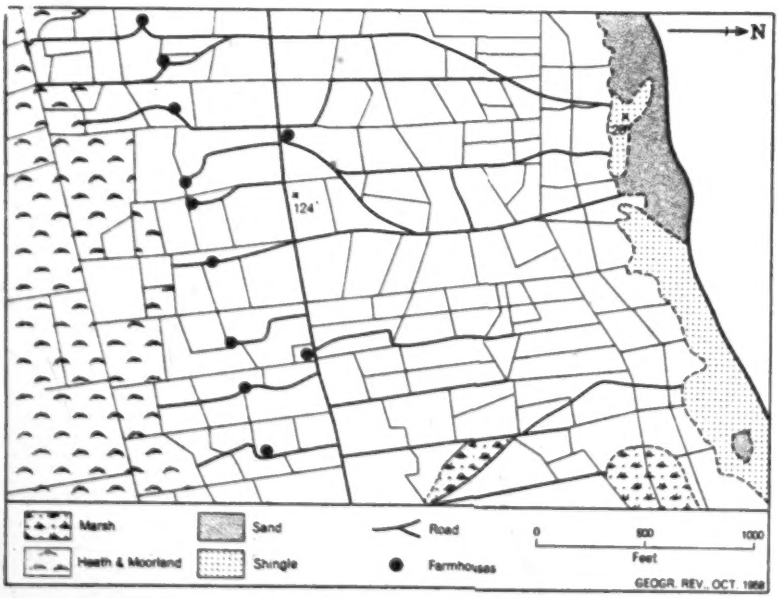

FIG. 4—"Striped" farms and fields in County Kerry. (Based on the Ordnance Survey, by permission of the Minister of Finance, Republic of Ireland.)

mentary authorization. Although it is rarely possible to obtain information on the methods and precise date of consolidation, the destruction of the system can be explained, in broad terms, by its growing inefficiency and by the dissemination of new agricultural techniques.

Some of the unsatisfactory aspects of rundale agriculture sprang from the steady growth of the population of Ireland, which continued from sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century until the Great Famine of 1845–1847.[30] This increase led to a constant encroachment on various uncultivated areas, a process in which the general adoption of the potato as a subsistence crop played a major part.[31] But the "waste" lands brought under cultivation had not been completely unused, since often they were grazed by livestock under a well-developed transhumance.[32] This seasonal movement was important to the rural economy, because efficient rundale farming required that the animals be removed from the unfenced cultivated strips during the growing

[30] K. H. Connell: The Population of Ireland, 1750–1845 (Oxford, 1950).
[31] *Idem*: The Colonization of Waste Land in Ireland, 1780–1845, *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, Ser. 2, Vol. 3, 1950–1951, pp. 44–71.
[32] J. M. Graham: Transhumance in Ireland, *The Advancement of Sci.*, Vol. 10, 1953–1954, pp. 74–79.

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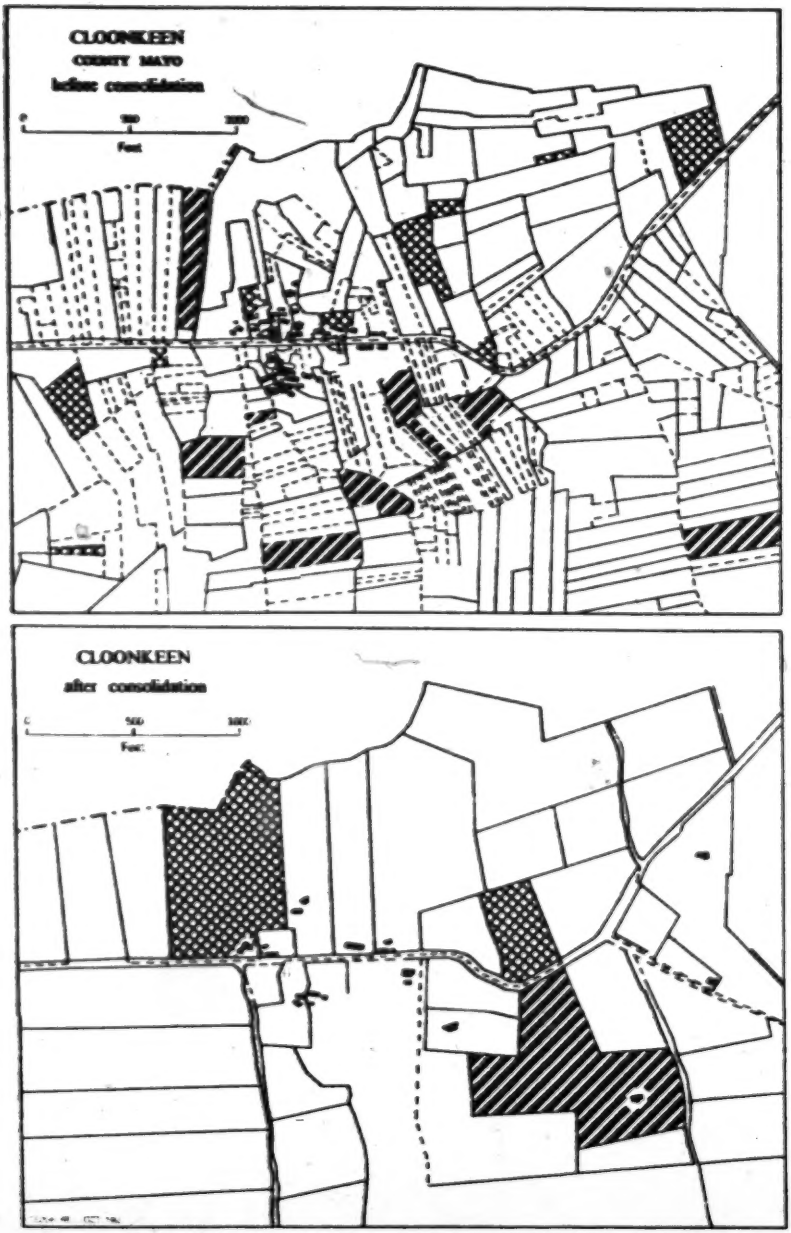

FIG. 5—Cloonkeen, County Mayo, before and after consolidation. The two different shadings (crosshatch and diagonal ruling) represent land held by two typical farmers before and after the consolidation carried out in 1909 by the Congested Districts Board. (Based on information kindly provided by the Irish Land Commission and reproduced by permission.)

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season; and the end of transhumance made the working of the system more difficult. Similarly, the increase of population led to a remarkable growth in the size of many clachans, which often made life in them increasingly inconvenient. Squabbles over rights of way and other petty affairs were common, and there was a growing awareness that the old methods of farming were becoming unsatisfactory. The introduction of new crops and rotations gave the *coup de grâce* to the efficiency of the system; for they were difficult to integrate into it, and therefore agricultural improvement was retarded.

The impetus behind the changes, however, usually did not come from the farmers themselves but from their landlords. Indeed, it seems possible that peasant resistance to the destruction of rundale was a considerable factor in nineteenth-century opposition to landlordism.[33] Often landlords, intent on improving their estates, would put whole areas of land into the melting pot, consolidating holdings and sometimes evicting the surplus population. Frequently the new holdings were arranged up and down the slope of the land, an arrangement that has resulted in the characteristic striped appearance of much of the modern Irish landscape. Although long, narrow strips were probably not the best possible farm shape (Fig. 4), they represented a compromise between the traditional system of allocating each farmer a share of every quality of land and the landlords' demands for greater efficiency. At the same time the old clachan groups were broken up and new farmhouses were built, each within its own land. In such a way most of the better agricultural land was converted, but at the end of the nineteenth century various areas, particularly in the west of Ireland, still remained under the old system or some modification of it. This hard core has now been largely eliminated by government action. First the British government attempted a general improvement of living conditions in western Ireland by means of the Congested Districts Board, whose work included the reorganization of agricultural holdings (Fig. 5);[34] after 1922 and the establishment of the Irish Free State the task was taken over by the Irish Land Commission.[35]

In some areas, however, the disappearance of clachan settlement was part of a natural process in the late nineteenth century. The population of Ireland started to decrease after the Great Famine of the 1840's, and even in areas where there had been little rearrangement of holdings some clachans became

[33] See, for example, the Devon Commission Report [see footnote 11 above], Part 1, Appendix 14, p. 58.

[34] T. W. Freeman: The Congested Districts of Western Ireland, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 33, 1943, pp. 1–14.

[35] On this aspect of the Land Commission's work see "The Consolidation of Fragmented Agricultural Holdings" (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Washington, 1950), Chapter 3, "Relief of Rural Congestion in Ireland."

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uninhabited and in others only a single family remained. In these areas, too, partial consolidation was carried out by adding the fields of an emigrating farmer to those of some neighbor or relative who remained at home. The decrease in population had a more general influence as well: throughout Ireland it prevented former conditions from reasserting themselves. Everywhere there was diminished pressure on the land, and the growth of larger farms rather than renewed subdivision.

There are still gaps, then, in the story of Irish rural settlement. Until documentary and field evidence slowly yields the missing chapters, the past will remain a subject for speculation rather than for confident explanation. The rural systems of previous centuries are now disappearing, but the surviving remains may hold clues to former conditions, and their interpretation remains a continuing challenge.